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ON PAGE 32

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An Eavesdropper For the Soviets?

Britain's Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham is one of the world's biggest eavesdroppers. Working together with the U.S. National Security Agency, Cheltenham decodes and analyzes thousands of messages intercepted at listening posts all over the world. It is the nerve center of Britain's security network and a critical link in NATO's intelligence apparatus. So top spies throughout the East and West shuddered last week after British police arrested Geoffrey Arthur Prime, a Russian-language expert at Cheltenham for nine years, and charged him with espionage.

Margaret Thatcher refused to tell Parliament many details of the case, saying that she did not want to prejudice Prime's trial in November. She insisted that no other government employees were involved, and hinted that Prime, a quiet, 44-year-old family man, was too much of the loner to be involved in a spy ring. But privately, her aides told reporters not to underestimate the case, and some members of Parliament said that Prime might have seriously damaged national security over a thirteen-year period—even after he left Cheltenham in 1977.

If that is true, the implications are enormous. Prime could have told the Soviets which of their codes had been broken. With that knowledge, Moscow could use those communications channels to plant disinformation. As a result, NATO might have based some intelligence analyses on misleading data. Of course, disinformation works both ways: some U.S. experts wondered whether Britain was overdramatizing the case to convince the Russians that the information they allegedly received from Prime really was prime—when maybe it was a few cuts below.